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Young Palestinian Puts Democracy in Action

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Ahmad Al-Azzeh, volunteer observer, and Tim Russo, Tamkeen's election monitoring expert, at a polling station in Bethlehem on January 9.

For 25-year-old Ahmad Al-Azzeh, January 9 was a day like no other. Starting at 7:00 a.m., with the opening of polling stations across the West Bank and Gaza, he spent the next 17 hours witnessing democracy in action as Palestinians elected a new leader. It was also his first time casting a ballot.

"This day gives me hope for the future of my country," says Ahmad, who volunteered as a non-partisan election observer. "There is no way to know that the election is free and fair unless you see it for yourself. Then you can report back to your constituents and encourage them to participate."

Ahmad works for the Holy Land Trust, a small NGO that runs community development and peace-building programs in the West Bank. He was among close to 120 civil society leaders trained by a USAID project known as Tamkeen—meaning "empowerment" in Arabic—on how to mount election observation campaigns. Using the skills he learned, he then recruited, trained, and led a team of nine observers deployed at polling stations across his hometown of Bethlehem.

Ahmad observed the election process at three polling stations, taking notes, asking questions, and watching history in the making until the wee hours of the evening. He assumed his role with a great sense of pride and responsibility.

"The role of observers is very important," he stresses. "Imagine if there were no observers. Then everyone would accuse others of cheating," creating confusion and animosity between the political parties.

"As a local observer, the most wonderful sight for me was then I saw all those people from the different political factions, who were competing throughout the day for voters, settle down and rest to have a cup of tea with some jokes and laughs after that long hard day of work for the election," Ahmad says.

Although partisan observers were mostly untrained, he adds, their presence at polling stations was crucial. Once ballots are counted, both partisan and neutral observers are asked to sign off on the final results. By signing on the dotted line, they essentially agree that there was no wrongdoing or fraud.

This prevents political candidates from raising frivolous accusations against other parties if the final count is not in their favor. "In this way, election monitoring helps create respect and legitimacy for the voting process and the results," Ahmad explains.

Election officials are also more motivated to do things right, he adds. "For example, they held up every single ballot during the counting of the votes



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YOUNG PALESTINIAN CONTINUED

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so we could see it. They worked very hard to avoid any mistakes and were applying legal regulations very carefully."

Looking back, Ahmad is happy with what he and his colleagues did that day. "We did our best. We tried as much as possible to be clear and trustworthy, and to report the facts as they are."

It's an experience he won't soon forget and one he hopes augurs well for the future of democracy in the Palestinian territories.

As a conflict resolution trainer working largely with educators and children, Ahmad wants to see more young people engaged in "building a democratic, independent state where everyone can express themselves freely."

Many of his friends, he says, leave the West Bank and Gaza to find better opportunities abroad. But Ahmad hopes to change that through his work with kids. "I want to make sure they stay here and believe in their homeland. What I live for is to see my country free and my people living normal lives in peace and security—a real peace built on justice and the end of occupation."

With a Bachelor's in sociology from Bethlehem University and a graduate degree in human rights from the University of Malta, Ahmad also has a special interest in women's issues. He wrote his Master's thesis on women's political rights in the Arab world and provides training on gender issues.

"It's wrong to suppress or dominate women," he says. Both women and men have a role to play in realizing "our dream of establishing our independent democratic state."

By exercising his right to vote and volunteering his time as an election observer, Ahmad feels he contributed to that goal. In four years, he wants to see Palestinians elect a new leader in the same way—with respect for the rule of law and the participation of every segment of society, especially women and youths.

"Young people have to be involved," he says. "They have the vigor, enthusiasm, and potential to create change."

Ahmad demonstrated these very qualities on January 9—something he hopes to do yet again in July when Palestinians take to the polls to elect a new legislature.

WEST BANK/GAZA SNAPSHOT

Population: 3.2 million
GDP per person: \$1,640

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